
‘This house is mine’: A Rewriting of the ‘Doll’s House’ Legacy in Buchi Emecheta’s Kehinde

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Ever since it was premiered at Copenhagen’s Royal Theatre on 21st December 1879, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* has kept open the heated debate over the question of women’s rights, at once, legal, social, economic and existential; as understood in relation to their institutionalized identity as wives and mothers. The polarization of contemporary critical responses to this phenomenal play that, according to George Bernard Shaw, sent the sound of Nora’s slamming of the front door reverberating across the European stage, continued well beyond the nineteenth century along an uninterrupted flow of stage productions, literary rewritings and cinematic adaptations across Continents. While conservatives condemned, mocked or attempted to silence Nora’s rebellion against her institutionalized roles through sharp responses or radical rewritings of the play and Feminists found in Ibsen’s drama a bold celebration of their cause, another school of Ibsen critics deliberately downgraded the topical importance of the play by citing the playwright’s self-proclaimed status as a Humanist rather than a Feminist or reading *A Doll’s House* as a work of art against the grain of a propaganda play. While it is impossible to ignore this essentially polarized, either/or debate as an integral aspect of the ‘Doll’s House’ legacy inherited and appropriated by the Feminist literary tradition in the Continent and

beyond, it is time indeed, to consider alternative literary endorsements of this legacy beyond the binaristic responses that it has continued to incite. In this context, the paper will attempt a reading of Nigeria born British author Buchi Emecheta's novel *Kehinde* as a critical reassessment of Ibsen's text in the context of Nigeria's female immigrants in Britain. *Kehinde*, as this paper will argue, problematises Nora's progressive pursuit of an identity that is incumbent upon a rejection of the bourgeois family, the family home and its fraught value system. It attempts to negotiate the quintessential 'Doll's House' debate by reworking the Ibsen paradigm into a postcolonial diasporic framework.

Kehinde, by tracing the eponymous protagonist's emergence from her conventional roles as the devoted wife and mother to her renewed self-appraisal as a Black immigrant woman aware of her fundamental rights and entitlements, evokes on the one hand, Ibsen's fundamental quest in *A Doll's house*. At the same time, it rewrites Ibsen by replacing Nora's journey away from the infantile dependence and comfort of her middle class home into the cold hostile world beyond its threshold, with Kehinde's return to her London home to establish her claims after a disappointing experience at her husband's natal home in Lagos. Nora's journey is problematised in the postcolonial Nigerian context through Kehinde's redefinition of her roles as a mother, wife as well as a daughter who turns her back rebelliously on the land of her birth to embrace a yet uncertain destiny shaped by her host country. Unlike in Ibsen's play, in Emecheta's novel it is the husband who fails to return, while the wife comes back to discover a new beginning, urged by the mysterious voice of a spirit-twin in her head. The text thereby, substitutes Nora's linear departure from home with the eponymous Kehinde's circuitous journeys, from the host country Britain to a postcolonial Nigeria and then back to Britain. It replaces Ibsen's

spirited rebel with the mature immigrant who also turns out to be a revenant, with respect to the host country rather than the home country. Emecheta's *Kehinde*, a voice born out of the author's incisive literary inquiries into the sociological, mythical and existential parameters of womanhood in pre-colonial, colonial and diasporic African cultures; seems strategically to enact a transcendence of the engendered cultural codes already challenged in Ibsen. The thrust of *Kehinde*, as will be discussed in the following sections, unlike Ibsen's drama with which it undoubtedly invites comparison, is to fashion a female identity through a negotiation, rather than a challenging of culturally codified binaries which define women in a given socio-cultural context.

Kehinde, written in 1994, more than three decades since Emecheta's migration to England, is immensely relevant as a representative 'London novel' in the Black British novelistic tradition. As a product of the author's long stay in post imperial London, this later London novel¹ paves way for a dynamic authorial self-fashioning through confession, retrospection, unraveling and a radical interrogation of the intertwined discourses of nation, gender, class, race and sexuality in a diasporic context. More emphatically than in her previous London novels, Emecheta in *Kehinde* seems to be using the 'voices of women' to 'tell the world our part of the story', (449) as she claims in an interview conducted in the year the novel was published. Although it does not explicitly deal with the development of an authorial self in the manner of her first two novels, namely, *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* it is intimately connected with the quests of its predecessors, namely, the pursuit of identity and the yearning for a home in the heart of the mother country. Unlike in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, where Nora's individuation must occur at the cost of jettisoning her home, in Emecheta's London novel, home remains one of the principal means through which the postcolonial

female immigrant must assert her identity as a Black-British middle-class woman. The intricate grid of journeys and homecomings delineated in the novel is the literary outcome of a migrant self that has made its choice of embracing the host country after a long and arduous trial. In its ability to question and transcend engendered modes of being, the text succinctly ties together motifs explored in previous works, conveying the sense of a closure that can only be possible through a negotiation of binaries that the previous works evoke. Like the protagonist Gwendolen in her former novel *Gwendolen or The Family* for instance, Emecheta's Kehinde comes to define her identity through an acceptance rather than a rejection of England, her host country where she finally feels at home. Unlike the young Gwendolen who defines this identity through the agency of motherhood, however, Kehinde demythologizes the iconic importance of motherhood and seeks alternative avenues of self-fashioning made available to the modern Igbo woman living in post-imperial Britain. In this she is both like and unlike her predecessor Nnu ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who devotes her life unconditionally to the needs of her ungrateful children but refuses to bless women with the 'joys of motherhood' when after her death a shrine is erected in honour of her status as an exemplary Igbo mother. Kehinde integrates the rebellious voices of both Nnu Ego's vengeful spirit and Ibsen's Nora, her Nigerian and European predecessors, when in her final decision not to sell the house in London on the demands of either her absentee husband or her adolescent son, she refuses to play the model wife and mother in tune with her community's engendered norms. As she asserts her legal rights to the house, her social and intellectual rights to a well paid job and her existential rights as a 'human' towards the end of the novel, Kehinde neither echoes nor questions Nora's quest; rather, she completes it in the context of a particular milieu long familiar to the author, the

world of Nigerian immigrants in Britain.

The opening chapter of *Kehinde* titled ‘The Letter’, introduces the reader to the tiny dining room of the Okolos who live in their ‘typical East London mid-terrace house with a small living room’(2). The Okolos’ deft economizing of domestic space for the purpose of bringing in ‘that extra pound or two’(2) by subletting a part of the house to temporary tenants, borders on an obsession with money that also dominates Nora’s world. The terrace-house with its stringently rationed space and the Helmer house, ‘tastefully but not expensively furnished’(1) may not echo one another. Although the Okolos’ legal claim to the house is no less secure than that of Torvald Helmer in Ibsen’s play, their awareness of being immigrants waiting to return to the home country makes their emotional claims to the London home appear less grounded than that of the former. With the near-claustrophobic compactness of Ibsen’s stage space, the audience is admitted into the nineteenth-century bastion of the White European middle-class male: the ‘doll’s house’. In Emecheta’s story about a Nigerian immigrant family in London however, the debilitating experience of race works in tandem with the legal provision for gender equality to problematise Albert Okolo’s patriarchal claim upon the house. In answer to Kehinde’s flattering remark about his ownership of a house in London therefore, Albert quickly says “We own a house”(4). Cutting across this patronizing display of gender equality on Albert’s part however, comes Emecheta’s ironic statement about the speaker’s need to preserve appearances for the sake of domestic harmony. Turning the tables on the Nora-Helmer relationship in Ibsen’s play, Emecheta complicates the familiar gender dynamics of family finance by making the wife earn more than the husband and by allowing her to be responsible for procuring the required mortgage for the house. The continuity between the two different bourgeois milieus, those of Ibsen and Emecheta is

nevertheless maintained through another fundamental motif, that of pretence and role-playing. In Ibsen's nineteenth century play the Helmers' marital game of role-playing refers to the contemporary bourgeois social structure where men and women were allotted well delineated roles as breadwinners and caregivers, pertaining respectively, to the public and domestic spheres. In *Kehinde*, the socio-economic reality that shapes the migrant world of the Okolos is more complicated; as it seems to straddle multiple social, cultural and ethical paradigms entailed by their ethnic origin, their links with Nigeria as a Postcolonial nation and by the relative impact of the host country Britain upon their lives. Welfare and Post Welfare Britain, notwithstanding racism and the fraught conflicts regarding immigration policies, did not only welcome a huge immigrant population from Africa and the Caribbean, but also ensured that they be unconditionally subject to the policies of the State concerning health, childcare, education, housing and other major sectors. A paradigmatic shift in traditional gender relations and family dynamics was one of the most immediate impacts of these changes that the immigrant was subject to. In her early autobiographical novels *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* Emecheta had already pointed out the dualistic implications of these changes in the lives of Nigerian immigrants. In *Kehinde* too, the debate is continued through the deliberate juxtaposition of role-playing and its underlying tensions, reminding the audience of the fragility of the Helmers' make-believe world in a different cultural context. In between the lines where the couple exchanges views about their claims to the London house, the author introduces her own ironic statements:

He[Albert] was not unaware of the legal status of a wife here in London. In Nigeria, the home belonged to the man, even if the woman spent her entire life keeping it in order...But Albert did

not want trouble, so for the sake of peace he said ‘Our house’... It was because of her position in the bank that they had been able to get a mortgage. But a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband of such things. When Kehinde said ‘your house’, she was playing the role of the ‘good’ Nigerian woman...After sixteen years of marriage, they played this game without thinking. (4)

The ‘game’ they play at the beginning of the narrative, unlike the one that dominates the world of Ibsen’s play, is clearly the result of a mutual compromise, between traditional notions of the ‘good Nigerian woman’ as duty-bound and subservient and the legal mandates of gender equality that England has compelled them to observe. The game is suddenly disrupted in the opening chapter when Albert receives a letter from his sisters in Nigeria, urging him to return home to a country recently made prosperous by the ‘Oil boom’. Kehinde, expecting her third child and feeling slighted by Albert’s sudden decision to go back, leaving his family behind, decides to break the news of her pregnancy at this dramatic juncture. Emecheta uses the Ibsenian device of ‘the letter’ in the very opening chapter bearing the same title, as a theatrical device for introducing conflict and revelation. Jolted out of the reverie of their pretty make-believe English life, the couple suddenly discovers unresolved tensions in their marital relationship. While Kehinde begins suspecting Albert’s underlying intentions to return to Nigeria as a means to satisfy his unfulfilled longings to play the traditional patriarch, Albert sees Kehinde’s pregnancy as a feminine scheme devised on intention to thwart his plan of leaving England. At any cost, Albert decides to leave England, a ‘stupid country’ where ‘women rule’(15) for Nigeria, the home where he can now live in grand style as a ‘been-to’ man². Unfortunately, he fulfills the dream of reverting to an indigenous patriarchy by transgressing against what is

considered to be a taboo amongst his own people; that is, by sanctioning abortion. A Catholic convert hailing from a polygamous Igbo family that accorded special importance to motherhood and childbirth, Albert seems already to have severed his ties with tradition, when he compels Kehinde to abort the child much against her will to prevent financial obligations at this decisive point. Having performed this surgery upon his own traditional self, Albert manages to keep his plans intact. By terminating the pregnancy he fulfills dual necessities simultaneously; returning to Nigeria to try his luck and ensuring Kehinde's promotion at the bank for the sake of the money he will need soon.

The promise enveloped in the letter soon begins to take shape as Albert returns to Nigeria, marries an eligible woman with a university degree and a well paid job without the knowledge of his first wife and starts tasting of the luxury of a 'been-to' in his own country. In London Kehinde sits back unaware, waiting for the day she will earn enough to go back and join her husband in Nigeria. While she waits in anticipation, pursuing her job and minding her two children, the much coveted London-house begins to get dismantled right under her nose. The furniture and the old Jaguar, one of the most prized possessions of the couple are shipped off one by one to Lagos to fill Albert's new home, one that Kehinde soon discovers, she must learn to share not only with a co-wife, but with an endless retinue of in-laws from a polygamous family. Return to Nigeria completes Kehinde's institutionalization as a 'doll-wife', a role that she had only played complacently while staying in England. Mid-way into the narrative, the 'doll's house' paradigm becomes more recognisably Ibsenian than before, as the couple's mutual compromise in the past now tilts in favour of the man who finds himself invested with a new patriarchal authority. Emecheta's Kehinde becomes a pitiable echo of the helpless Nora of the first Act

when she is ordered to do down on her knees and accept from Albert the 'first housekeeping money in over eighteen years of marriage'(94). The narrative however, does not stop here in what Kehinde terms a 'man's world'(94) in a letter to her friend Moriammo in London. After a spell of bitter humiliation Kehinde is able to return to London when her good friend Moriammo sends money for the passage fare in response to the letter. Leaving behind the Lagos home as determinedly as Ibsen's young rebel, Kehinde completes her journey only when she returns to the familiar 'terrace house' in London, the smell of which 'welcomed her like a lost child'(108). Wrenching the 'For Sale' placard from the ground with determined strength and claiming the possession of the house defiantly, the immigrant seals her fate with that of the host country, turning her back determinedly on the illusion of leading a luxurious life in her homeland.

A curious echo of Ibsen's slamming of the door on the engendered institution of the bourgeois family reverberates in the last pages of the novel. The final scene features a seasoned rebel in Kehinde who sits back unperturbed, immersed in the self possessed gesture of sipping sweet tea at her London home while her son, enraged by the revelation that the rent from the house is not his to claim as his father had promised, rushes into the street slamming the door noisily behind him. With gentle irony Emecheta describes how 'The slamming of the street door echoed round the ageing house' and eventually 'died down'(141). The last scene keeps alive the revolutionary spirit of Ibsen's drama by evoking the figure of 'the rebel who happened to be your mother'(141). It does so however, not through a repetition of Ibsen's final act but through important alterations and substitutions. By allowing the voice of Joshua, representing her absentee father's legal and financial claims to the property to fade along with the sound of the street door, the narrative exorcises the universal claims of

patriarchy handed down generationally from father to son. Further, by making the son leave the mother's house in a fit of rage instead of the reverse, the author refrains from confronting her protagonist with the fundamental choice between motherhood and independence. Emecheta's Kehinde, unlike Ibsen's Nora, has little need of juxtaposing motherhood against the sacred duties to her 'self'; nor does she explicitly terminate her marital bond. In answer to Joshua's query that the house belongs to his father as well, Kehinde says that she did not drive him away and that 'He's free to return any time he wants' (139). The right she claims rebelliously at the end of the novel is more than the right to her house, her job and her body; it is the quintessentially Ibsenian notion of the rights of a 'human'. In this final exchange between Kehinde and the spirit of her deceased twin Taiwo, the legacy of Ibsen is realised beyond the debate over motherhood and independence. When the protagonist tells Taiwo that "Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human" (141), she is voicing her belief in a model of female emancipation where the identity of the wife and the mother is continuous, rather than in conflict with that of the human who values her self-worth as an independent being.

In answer to the 'woman question' as applicable to her own social situation, Emecheta provides her readers with the motif of the inverted journey, taking us inward into the warm house rather than out into the cold streets, into the depths of the self rather than its image in the outside world. The journey back home that costs Kehinde an emotional rift with her immediate family, also signals a reunion with the alter ego she found difficult to reconcile with in the past: the voice of her twin sister Taiwo who died at birth. The voice that begins playing in her head in decisive moments, filling her mind almost invariably with doubts and rebellious notions now declares itself as one with her own voice. As Taiwo whispers into Kehinde's

ears 'Now we are one' (141), the narrative reaches a consensus between the voice of the living Kehinde, representing respect for traditional beliefs and that of her dead twin, representing time and again, the rebellious spirit that subverts traditional gender discourses. This closure allows the reader, like the protagonist, to transcend the schizophrenic process of engendering female identity through the juxtaposition of binaries like good and bad, self-less and selfish, traditional and modern. It keeps open the provisions for a dialogue between these binaries that so commonly feature in discourses on the nation, race, ethnicity and class identities.

In this context it may be argued that the internal dialogue that ends the novel is developed not in isolation, but as an outcome of continuous social exchanges between the women in the text. Kehinde's interactions with women other than the spirit of Taiwo; namely, her friend Moriammo in London, her sister Ifeyinwa in Lagos, her daughter Bimpe, her colleague Melissa, the tenant Amaka and even the co-patient Leah at the London clinic become instrumental in developing her consciousness as an individual. Apart from the oral interactions in English punctuated with Yoruba pidgin and untranslated Igbo and Yoruba words, Emecheta also appropriates the Ibsenian device of the 'letter' in *A Doll's House* as a mode of communication and confession practiced primarily by the women in the novel. The novel opens with reference to the ominous contents of the letter written by Albert's sisters urging him to return to Nigeria. The letter Albert takes care to open at the tea-table in the presence of his family bears tidings that Kehinde had long been anticipating. The second letter presented in the narrative is the terse one written by Albert to Kehinde from Nigeria. It has little to offer beyond the statement of changes in the family finance and a cursory description of his new job. In contrast to Albert's matter-of-fact letter, the letters exchanged by Kehinde and Moriammo are infused with warmth,

spontaneity and the assurance of friendship that is lacking in the previous letter. In fact it is through the agency of the letter that Kehinde can call out for help from her close friend living overseas and eventually receive it, in the form of the transport fare to return to England that she can ill afford to pay presently. The letter brings together not just estranged friends and sisters, separated by the divisive power of religion and gender discourses; it also bridges the gap between generations by keeping the conversation between mother and daughter flowing across geographical barriers. In her letter to Kehinde, addressing her as 'dear special mother' (120) the daughter Bimpe congratulates her mother on her successful completion of a degree in sociology, reminding us of Emecheta's own career. The letter, like those of Kehinde and Moriammo, shares information alongside hopes and anxieties through the narration of everyday life in an intimate mode that is emblematic of Emecheta's own style. This last letter signifying the inseparability of the mother-daughter bonding celebrated so often in African women's texts implementing Alice Walker's concept of Womanism³, seems to complement *A Doll's House's* intriguing silence on the nature of a future relationship between Nora and her children. By keeping Kehinde's journey grounded (through its insistence on the immigrant's claims upon her house) as well as open-ended (through its ability to reach out to women across geographical, national, religious and cultural barriers), Emecheta seems to resolve many of the dilemmas posed by Ibsen's Nora and her ground-breaking rebellion.

Endnotes

1. The first two London novels were published respectively in 1972 and 1974. In 1983 they were published together under the title 'Adah's story'. Before the publication of *Gwendolen* or *The Family* in 1989, however, Emecheta did not attempt another novel set in London. Kehinde was published in 1994 followed by *The New Tribe* in 2000.

2. 'Been-to' was a colloquial form of address for the Western educated Nigerian man and by extension, his wife when they returned to their hometown. The address, which gained the status of a title of great respect features in several of Emecheta's novels, including *Second Class Citizen* and *Kehinde*.

3. Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* defines the Womanist mode of conduct as 'outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behaviour...responsible. In charge. *Serious*'(5). In *African Wo/Man Palava*, a critical volume on Nigerian women writers, Ogunyemi draws upon the Walker's concept to define Womanism as "African women's inclusive, mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring – familial, communal, national, and international."(114)

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